man of the inconsequence of life, of the insignificance of the individual, his hopes, ambitions, happiness, and even usefulness, in the complicated machinery of natural laws. It may be that I shall not come back. But I wish to take with me your promise that if I have not returned at the end of two years or you have received no reason for my detention, you will believe that I am dead. There would be but one insupportable drop in the bitterness of death, the doubt of your faith in my word and my love. Are you too much of a woman to curb your imagination in a long, unbroken silence?"

"I have learned so much that one lesson more is no tax on my faith. And I no longer live in a world of little things. I promise you that I shall never falter nor doubt."

He bent his head and kissed her for the first time without passion, but solemnly, as had their nuptials indeed been accomplished, and the greater mystery of spiritual union isolated them for a moment in that twilight region where the mortal part did not enter.

As they left the church they saw that all the Indians of the Mission and neighborhood, in a gala of color, had gathered to cheer the Russians as they rode away. Concha was to return as she had come, beside the carreta of her mother, and as Rezanov mounted his horse she stood staring with unseeing eyes on the brilliant, animated scene. Suddenly she heard a suppressed sob, and felt a touch on her skirt. She looked round and saw Rosa, kneeling close to the church. For a moment she continued to stare, hardly comprehending, in the intense concentration of her faculties, that tangible beings, other than herself and Rezanov, still moved on the earth. Then her mind relaxed. She was normal in a normal world once more. She stooped and patted the hands clasping her skirts.

"Poor Rosa!" she said. "Poor Rosa!"

Over the intense green of islands and hills were long banners of yellow and purple mist, where the wild flowers were lifting their heads. The whole quivering bay was as green as the land, but far away the mountains of the east were pink. Where there was a patch of verdure on the sand hills the warm golden red of the poppy flaunted in the sunshine. All nature was in gala attire like the Californians themselves, as the Juno under full sail sped through "The Mouth of the Gulf of the Farallones." Fort San Joaquin saluted with seven guns; the Juno returned the compliment with nine. The Comandate, his family and guests, stood on the hill above the fort, cheering, waving sombreros and handkerchiefs. Wind and tide carried the ship rapidly out the straits. Rezanov dropped the cocked hat he had been waving and raised his field-glass. Concha, as ever, stood a little apart. As the ship grew smaller and the company turned toward the Presidio, she advanced to the edge of the bluff. The wind lifted her loosened mantilla, billowing it out on one side, and as she stood with her hands pressed against her heart, she might, save for her empty arms, have been the eidolon of the Madonna di San Sisto. In her eyes was the same expression of vague arrested horror as she looked out on that world of menacing imperfections the blind forces of nature and man had created; her body was instinct with the same nervous leashed impotent energy.

XXV.

The white rain clouds, rolling as ever like a nervous intruder over the great snow peaks behind the steep hills black with forest that rose like a wall behind the little settlement of Sitka, parted for a moment, and the sun, a coy disdainful guest, flung a glittering mist over what Nature had intended to be one of the most enchanting spots on earth, until, in a fit of ill-temper—with one of the gods, no doubt—she gave it to Niobe as a permanent outlet for her discontent. When it does not rain at Sitka it pours, and when once in a way she draws a deep breath of respite and lifts her grand and glorious face to the sun, in pathetic gratitude for her dear, infrequent favor, comes a wild flurry of snow or a close white fog from the inland waters; and like a great beauty condemned to wear a veil through life, she can but stare in dumb resentment through the folds, consoling herself with the knowledge that could the world but see it must surely worship. Perhaps—who knows?—she really is a frozen goddess, condemned to the veil for infidelity to him imprisoned in the geat volcano across the sound, who sends up a column of light once in a way to dazzle her shrouded eyes, and failing that batters her with rock and stone like any lover of the slums. One day he spat forth a rock like a small hill, and big enough to dominate the strip of lowland at least, standing out on the edge of the island like a guard at the gates, and never a part of the alien surface. Between this lofty rock and the forest was the walled settlement of New Archangel, that Baranhov, the dauntless, had wrested from the bloodthirsty Kolosh but a short time since and purposed to hold in the interest of the Russian-American Company. His log hut, painted like the other buildings with a yellow ochre found in the soil, stood on the rock, and his glass swept the forest as often as the sea.

As Rezanov, on the second of July, thirty-one days after leaving San Francisco, sailed into the harbor with its hundred bits of volcanic woodland weeping as ever, he gave a whimsical sigh in tribute to the gay and ever-changing beauties of the southern land, but was in no mood for sentimental reminiscence. Natives, paddling eagerly out to sea in their bidarkas to be the first to bring in good news or bad, had given him a report covering the period of his absence that filled him with dismay. There had been deaths from scurvy; one of the largest ships belonging to the company had been wrecked and the entire cargo lost; of a hunting party of three hundred Aleuts in one hundred and forty bidarkas, which had gone from Sitka to Kadiak in November of the preceding year, not one had arrived at its destination, and there was reason to believe that all had been drowned or massacred; and the Russians and Aleuts at Behring's Bay settlement had been exterminated by one of the native tribes.

But the Juno was received with salvos of artillery from the fort, and cheered by the entire population of the settlement, crowded on the beach. Baranhov, looking like a monkey with a mummy's head in which only a pair of incomparably shrewd eyes still lived, his black wig fastened on his bald red-fringed pate with a silk handkerchief tied under his chin, stood, hands on hips, shaking with excitement and delight. The bearded long-haired priests, in full canonicals of black and gold, were beside the Chief-Manager, ready to escort the Chamberlain to the chapel at the head of the solitary street, where the bells were pealing and a mass of thanksgiving was to be said for his safe return.

But it was some time before Rezanov could reach the chapel or even exchange salutations with Baranhov. As he stepped on shore he was surrounded, almost hustled by the shouting crowd of Russians—many of them convicts—Aleuts and Sitkans, who knelt at his feet, endeavored to kiss his hand, his garments, in their hysterical gratitude for the food he had brought them. For the first time he felt reconciled to his departure from California, and Concha's image faded as he looked at the tearful faces of the diseased, ill-nourished wretches who gave their mite of life that he might live as became a great noble of the Russian Empire. But although he tingled with pleasure and was deeply moved, he by no means swelled with vanity, for he was far too clear-sighted to doubt he had done more than his duty, or that his duty was more than begun. He made them a little speech, giving his word they should be properly fed hereafter, that he would make the improvement of their condition as well as that of all the employes of the company throughout this vast chain of settlements on the Pacific, the chief consideration of his life; and they believed him and followed him to the chapel rejoicing, reconciled for once to their lot.

After the service Rezanov went up to the hut of the Chief-Manager, a habitation that leaked winter and summer, and was equally deficient in light, ventilation and order. But Baranhov in the sixteen years of his exile had forgotten the bare lineaments of comfort, and devoted his days to advancing the interests of the company, his nights, save when sleep overcame him, to potations that would have buried an ordinary man under Alaskan snows long before. But Baranhov had fourteen years more of good service in him, and rescued the company from insolvency again and again, nor ever played into the hands of marauding foreigners; with brain on fire he was shrewder than the soberest.

He listened with deep satisfaction to the Chamberlain's account of his success with the Californians and his glowing pictures of the country, nodding every few moments with emphatic approval. But as the story finished his wonderful eyes were two bubbling springs of humor, and Rezanov, who knew him well, recrossed his legs nervously.

"What is it?" he asked. "What have I done now? Remember that you have been in this business for sixteen years, and I one——"

"How many measures of corn did you say you had brought, Excellency?"

Two hundred and ninety-four," replied Rezanov proudly.

"A provision that exceeds my most sanguine hopes. The only thing that mitigates my satisfaction is that there is not a mill in the settlement to grind it."

Rezanov sprang to his feet with a violent exclamation, his face very red. There was no one whose good opinion he valued as he did that of this brilliant, dissipated, disinterested old genius; and he felt like a schoolboy. But although he started for the door, he recovered half-way, and rescating himself joined in the laughter of the little man who was rocking back and forth on his bench, his weazened leg clasped against his shrunken chest.

"How on earth was I to know all your domestic arrangements?" he said testily. "God knows I found them limited enough last winter, but it never occurred to me there was any mysterious process involved in converting corn into meal. Is it quite useless, then?"

"Oh, no, we can boil or roast it. It will dispose of what teeth we have left, but that will serve the good purpose of reminding us always of your Excellency's interest in our welfare."

Rezanov shrugged his shoulders. "Give the corn to the natives. It is farinaceous at all events. And you can have nothing to say against the flour I have brought, and the peas, beans, tallow, butter, barley, salt, and salted meats—in all to the value of twenty-four thousand Spanish dollars."

The Chief-Manager's head nodded with the vigor and rapidity of a mechanical toy. "It is a God-send, a God-send. If you did no more than that you would have earned our everlasting gratitude. It will make us over, give us renewed courage in this cursed existence. Are you not going to get me out of it?"

Rezanov shook his head with a smile. "Literally you are the whole company. As long as I live here you stay—although when I reach St. Petersburg I shall see that you receive every possible reward and honor."

Baranhov lifted his shoulders to his ears in quizzical resignation. "I suppose it matters little where the last few years left me are spent, and I can hang the medals on the walls to console me when I have rheumatism, and shout my titles from the top of the fort when the Kolosh are yelling at the barricades."

"You must make yourself more comfortable," said Rezanov emphatically. "You are wrong to carry your honesty and enthusiasm to the point of living like the promuschleniki. Take enough of their time to build you a comfortable dwelling, and I will send you, on my own account, far more substantial rewards than orders and titles. Build a big house for that matter. I shall be here more or less—when I am not in California." And he told Baranhov of his proposed marriage with the daughter of Don Jose Arguello.

The Chief-Manager listened to this confidence with an even livelier satisfaction than to the list of the Juno's cargo.

"We shall have California yet!" he cried, his eyes snapping like live coals under the black thatch of wig. "Absorption or the bayonet. It matters little. Ten years from now and we will have a line of settlements as far south as San Diego. My plan was to feel my way down the northern coast of California with a colony, which should buy a tract of land from the natives and engage immediately in otter hunting—somewhere between Cape Mendocino and Drake's Bay. The Spanish have no settlements above San Francisco and are too weak to drive us out. They would rage and bluster and